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SUBJECT: FRANCE DRAWS FIRE FOR HONORING CHINESE CENSOR

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The French MFA defended its decision to award the Legion of Honor to Long Xinmin, former head of the Chinese agency that controls and censors the press, against complaints from a French NGO and the media that such an honor compromises France's stated commitment to freedom of the press. The MFA claims Long was instrumental in organizing major Franco-Chinese cultural events and that the nomination pre-dated his tenure at the helm of the General Administration of Press and Publications. However, China desk officer Agnes Humruzian did acknowledge that the MFA had not foreseen the strong blowback from what it had intended as a benign gesture of bilateral friendship. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On April 3, French Ambassador Herve Ladsous granted Long Xinmin the Legion of Honor, the highest award a non-French citizen may receive for service to France. Ladsous applauded Long's contribution to Franco-Chinese friendship and saluted his contributions toward a freer press, particularly his work to ensure that foreign journalists could work in China during next summer's Olympic Games. However, the French media and human rights groups have charged that Long, the former head of the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP), the government body that controls the press and the Internet, was in fact a repressive censor who employed draconian tactics to silence dissent. France's 24-hour news station, LCI TV, called the award an "incredible blunder." French NGO Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontieres) has sent a letter to FM Philippe Douste-Blazy asking him to account for his decision to award the Legion of Honor to "a censor in the service of an authoritarian government," according to a statement on its Web site.

¶3. (C) Agnes Humruzian, desk officer for China and human rights at the MFA, defended the award, explaining that Long was honored for his efforts on behalf of Franco-Chinese cultural cooperation. As Deputy Secretary of Cultural Affairs for the city of Beijing from 2000 to 2005, Long spearheaded the Chinese portion of "Shared Years" (Les Annees Croisees), a two-year celebration of bilateral friendship, during which China hosted hundreds of cultural and educational events throughout the country in honor of France. Humruzian continued that Long's nomination for the Legion of Honor began long before he was appointed head of the nation's censoring board. She reluctantly acknowledged that Long "had developed a reputation in his present position for tough measures aimed at journalists", and confessed that the MFA had not anticipated the adverse public reaction. However, she insisted it should not be interpreted as any weakening of France's longstanding advocacy of press freedoms, and that in conferring the honor, the GoF had not intended to damage

China's nascent positive steps in that direction.

¶4. (C) Vincent Brossel, head of Reporters Without Border's Asian desk, dismissed the MFA's reasoning as an after-the-fact justification for a diplomatic gaffe. "France has an obligation to uphold and advance its republican values through the Legion of Honor. Yes, all western nations have commercial and security interests in China, but why honor an infamous censor so publicly?" he told Poloff April 26. In deference to what Brossel characterized as Long's notorious and widely known reputation, Amb. Ladsous should have scuttled the Legion of Honor and acknowledged Long's cultural contributions more discreetly. Brossel added that the MFA had told him to expect a response to his letter from Douste-Blazy within two weeks.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The facts seem to suggest a genuine bureaucratic error rather than a calculated weakening on free expression for the sake of comity with the Chinese. When pressed, even Brossel acknowledged that the mistake was more likely foolish than cynical, despite the fact that Reporters Without Borders' press release implied that the Legion of Honor has become a means to advance bilateral relations without regard to the recipient's core values.

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